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A Devious One

And another CIA tale — maybe. Ted Koppel's ABC *Nightly Newsline* is now sitting on a videotaped interview with one Scott Barnes of Redondo Beach that it may air soon, if the network doesn't get cold feet. Barnes claims to be a former CIA agent in the exact sense of the way the agency uses the word — a hired hand who, he says, was flown into Laos late last year with the mission of finding and possibly rescuing missing American POWs. Barnes claims he spied "two Caucasians" in a prison camp through a telephoto lens and sent the information back to Washington using a special Department of Energy Telex. The order then came back, he says, to "liquidate the merchandise" if he could confirm that the merchandise was American. Rather than kill the two men, Barnes says, he quit the mission. Could this be true? ABC producers, who spent 14 days with Barnes and recorded eight hours of interviews, say that Barnes passed a "rigorous polygraph and psychiatric exam" but admit they are nonetheless hesitant about using the story because "we just can't get an independent confirmation." Complicating the matter is that one of the contacts Barnes says he worked with, former Green Beret colonel James "Bo" Gritz, adamantly denies the story, insisting to both ABC and the *Weekly* that Barnes is "nuts" and a mental case. Gritz, who has openly been involved in POW rescue missions into Laos, does admit, however, that "on a particular occasion" he got money from a U.S. intelligence agency — he won't say which one — that was sent to

Barnes in Thailand. Gritz also concedes that he met with Barnes in a Manhattan Beach restaurant to discuss "spy photos," though he won't elaborate. He does deny one important element of Barnes' story, though — that there was another meeting at the office of Congressman Robert Dornan (R., Santa Monica) to discuss Laos, a meeting attended by exiled Laotian General Vang Pao and two other Laotians. Gritz perhaps disputes that Barnes was at this meeting because other witnesses were there, but Barnes' presence is confirmed by his signature in Dornan's guest book that day and by former Dornan aide Stan Mullen. Mullen says he, too, thinks Barnes is "crazy" but says he doesn't understand why Gritz is denying his taking part in the meeting. As for the meaning of it all, Barnes says he can only speculate, and the thought that occurs to him is that perhaps the two Americans were involved in planting "evidence" of chemical warfare in Laos to support the administration's charges that the Soviets are engaged in such warfare there — a claim the administration has been hard-pressed to prove. But that is only speculation, he says. And what will happen with this story? Well, ABC is still muttering to itself about whether to run it, though Koppel says some tangential parts of the story have been confirmed, and the *Boston Globe* and *Washington Post* are on to the story as well, with the *Globe* most likely to break it within the next few days.

— Tim Frasca and Marc Cooper